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ABSTRACT

The improvement of interpersonal communication is put forth as the primary purpose of student couples' workshops. Five assumptions were made: (1) a love relationship with the opposite sex is desirable, but takes work; (2) a good relationship is based on honest, open communication; (3) intimacy in a relationship is a cyclical thing; (4) constructive fighting is important in honest communication; and (5) the meaningful expression of affection is equally important. These assumptions form the basis for the workshops, which consisted of six sessions. Topics and formats for each session are explained and some examples given. (TL)

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STUDENT COUPLES WORKSHOP

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by

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COUPLES WORKSHOP

The primary purpose of the student couples workshop is to teach the participants some concepts and exercises for improving their inter-personal communication -- including techniques of constructive fighting, and expressions of affection.

There is another way to say this. Every love relationship, pre-marital or marital, has its healthy and unhealthy aspects. These seminars are aimed at the healthiest part of each participant and his love relationship. Of course, it is hoped that what is learned in these seminars will help couples to approach some of the unhealthier aspects of their relationship; but the seminars are not offered as "cures" for less healthy relationship problems. There are some aspects of every love relationship which are amenable to change only to a long-term process of growth, such as psychotherapy or just living.

Some specific assumptions are made about the workshops and the assumptions are the foundation for the weekly topics and exercises. These assumptions are shared with the participants and are as follows:

A. A love relationship with opposite sex, married or unmarried, is a desirable state; but good relationships are made, not given by God or the heavens. Couples must continually work together to keep their relationship exciting.

B. An exciting, growing love relationship, or a state of satisfying intimacy, is based on honest open communication between partners on almost all important issues.

C. Intimacy in a relationship is a cyclical thing; there are times of closeness interspersed with times of psychological distance. Honest communication, including constructive fighting, is one way by which the cycle moves -- sometimes to closeness, to distance, and back to closeness again.

D. Constructive fighting or sensible management of aggression is one of the most important processes to be mastered in the area of honest communication. Constructive fighting is like dancing; it has to be learned.

E. The meaningful expression of affection (sexual as well as non-sexual) is equally important in maintaining the cyclical flow of intimacy.

There are six, 2 hour sessions and one, 2-1/2 hour session in the workshop held once a week. In our case, these are in the evenings because of ease in scheduling. The sequence of topics are as follows:

Session 1: Getting acquainted, and
setting goals by the couples. (Evaluation)

Session 2: Three sides of you in the relationship: the parent, the adult, and the child.
Communication feedback training.

Session 3: Separateness in love relationships.

Session 4: Non-verbal communication in love relationships--a workshop for couples.

Session 5: Intimacy in love relationships:
non-sexual and sexual.

Session 6: Constructive marital fighting.

Session 7: Review of workshop and evaluation of goals.

Six groups of 4 or 5 student couples were arranged for the workshops. Two of the groups consisted of married couples, two of the groups unmarried couples and two of the groups half married and half unmarried couples.

Each group had 2 leaders and training sessions for the leaders were held on a weekly basis. Each group had an experienced professional or doctoral level student from the University Counseling Center as one of the leaders. Training sessions were conducted by two clinical psychologists in charge of the overall program. The couples were screened by the application form, the explanation of the workshop and in the first group meeting.

No crisis developed although potential difficulties were prepared for in the training sessions. Individual crisis therapy was available but no referrals were made for the purpose.

In the first session, the scope, content and philosophy of the workshop was presented. The interaction rules for the group were given, verbal and non-verbal getting acquainted exercises were utilized with discussion following these procedures. The main activity of the first session the establishment of behavioral goals for the couples, made up the balance of the two hours.

Behavioral goals setting is an attempt for the couple to be very specific about what behaviors would occur in the relationship if a goal were accomplished. For example, one couple said they would like better communication as a goal. More specific setting of this goal might involve paying attention to the partner, stating one's needs more clearly, listening to the partner's requests, accepting of without being defensive to one anothers angry feelings, etc. The specific goals were shared by individuals with their partners in the group and help given to become specific about goals and the behavioral changes that might reflect accomplishment of the goal. Mr. Hall will present this area of the workshops in more detail.

In general, each session followed the following format:

1. Feedback-rehash of previous seminar and/or exercises assigned as homework;
2. Exercise-discussion-encounter of weeks emphasized topic, and
3. Introduce the theme of the subsequent seminar, including homework if there is some.

These formats are presented as a framework rather than specific structured procedures. The homework was quite minimal, with the couples usually asked to write answers to 2 or 3 questions or to practice some of the techniques initially presented in the group.

A feedback model of communication is taught in the second session and is utilized throughout the remaining sessions. This model is diagrammed on the handout. Basic criteria for good feedback are the following:

a. Descriptive of my feelings rather than evaluative of the other person.
b. Specific rather than general.
c. About behavior that can be changed, whenever possible.

The model is practiced in the group with the leaders and other couples as observers. Topics, written down beforehand by each couple, are utilized. No topics are pursued, as the purpose here is to teach the model.

Separateness in the love relationship utilizes the feedback model to answer questions about partner differences and separateness. These questions cover self and other perceptions, need for apartness and how the couple initiate and encourage separateness in the relationship.

The non-verbal workshop involves relaxation training, self-awareness including the rudiments of massage, and communication with one's partner. The purpose is:

1. To teach some ways to pay more attention to one's own senses; to encourage one to be more alive in, within himself.
2. To make one aware of non-verbal communications in the love relationship and relationships with other people. Particularly to teach one how a greater awareness of this kind of communication can expand a relationship and create a more satisfying intimacy.

Stressed again is the fact that the interaction rules given during the first session are still in effect. Namely, (1) to be honest with one's self and the group, and (2) don't be anywhere one does not want to be. In the case of this workshop these rules mean that a person should not participate in the exercise if he feels too uncomfortable to do so; it is suggested that he may set out and watch the exercise until he feels like participating, if at all. No group member resorted to this nor did any report later that they felt uncomfortable.

The relaxation approach utilizing the Jacobsen's technique (1966) is presented followed by some self-awareness exercises. For example, while people are still lying on the floor and relaxed from the Jacobson method, participants are asked to practice focusing awareness in-on different parts of their bodies. The leader may say, "focus now on your breathing, neither help it or hinder it, just allow it and pay attention to it; focus on your skin, feel the temperature in the room; move from head to foot trying to be aware of the floor as it touches your body; feel your clothing as it touches your skin (on your shoulders, legs, etc.)."

The intimacy session allows couples to be by themselves to establish where they are in their relationship at that time, essentially their current psychological distance from one another. Angry feelings, if present, are shared by the couple in the first part of the session, using the good feedback model. The quarrel is put aside so that intimacy can be the focus of the relationship. Issues of previous intimate experiences, both sexual and non-sexual that are meaningful, are shared. Moving psychologically closer and separate are also topics shared within the feedback model. Non-verbal exercises are utilized for head, face, arm, and shoulder awareness thru touch are tried.